

## OTHER OPINION

### Medicare Drug Cards Will Save Seniors Money

**T**he verdict is in — Medicare's new drug discount card will save seniors money. This will come as disappointing news to those critics who opposed expanding Medicare and who continue to disparage the program to this day. But the facts are indisputable: In many instances, seniors will save hundreds, if not thousands, of dollars a year.

For starters, any senior with an income of less than \$12,500 a year (\$16,800 for a couple) will get \$600 in drug costs paid free by Medicare this year and \$1,200 over the next two years. Seven million seniors in America will qualify for this free \$600 credit. "These people should run, not walk, to sign up," said Robert Hayes of the Medicare Rights Center.

Here are some examples of what the discount card will mean for three commonly prescribed prescription drugs. These examples are for a one-month supply of Zocor (cholesterol), Nexium (heartburn) and Fosamax (osteoporosis).

Drug	Costco.com price	Discount card price	Monthly savings	Yearly savings
Zocor	\$123.47	\$92.05	\$31.42	\$377.04
Nexium	\$125.47	\$96.63	\$28.84	\$346.08
Fosamax	\$67.89	\$57.81	\$10.08	\$120.96

A low-income senior who takes all three of those drugs (studies show most people 65 or older use at least five prescription drugs) would save \$1,440 a year, combining \$844 in savings and the \$600 credit.

NANCY L. JOHNSON

Those who suggest that such savings don't matter to Connecticut's seniors are either out of touch or insensitive to the financial hardships facing many of our older Americans. Shame on anyone who tries to tell a senior that \$1,440 in annual savings is meaningless.

The discount card program is part of the new and improved Medicare law I helped write last year. The cards, costing between nothing and \$30 a year, will provide seniors with discounts up to 25 percent off current retail prices. And in less than two years, the cards will be replaced with something even better — a Medicare program that for the first time will cover prescription drugs for most seniors in the same way it pays for doctors visits and hospital stays.

Until then, the discount cards will help all seniors cope with the high price of prescription drugs.

Every senior, including those with drug coverage, should look into the program because cards may offer even greater savings on one or more expensive drugs.

To make sure seniors find the right card with the biggest discounts, Medicare is helping in two ways. Seniors can call, toll-free, 1-800-633-4227 to learn about drug cards available in Connecticut. All that seniors need to do is provide a list of local pharmacies (and ask also for the lowest-cost pharmacy in their area) and a list of prescriptions, and a Medicare-trained operator will send a customized print-out of the cards that best meet their needs.

In addition, the official Medicare website ([www.medicare.gov](http://www.medicare.gov)) provides information about drug prices at pharmacies in Connecticut under each card. This unprecedented price "transparency" and the competition for customers among cards will force prices down. The website is a useful one-stop-shopping resource for those comfortable using the Internet. With so many senior centers now wired for the Web, staff members can assist in using this new technology.

Once seniors choose the card that's right for them, they can present it to the pharmacist when filling a

prescription and save money. It's that simple.

The biggest obstacle seniors face is recognizing the misinformation coming from partisans in Congress who voted against adding \$400 billion to fund Medicare prescription drug benefits. These opponents of the bill are now falsely claiming that the drug card will not offer savings to seniors. Even the AARP, the nation's most respected seniors group, says these partisans "have gone off the extreme end."

When the discount cards take effect in June, Medicare for the first time will help seniors pay for the prescriptions they need to stay healthy. The cards are a historic first step toward making prescription drugs more affordable for America's seniors — but only a first step. With the full program in place, Medicare will pay 75 percent of the cost of drugs for seniors. This is a costly, but long overdue, expansion of the Medicare program.

Our seniors are worth it.

*Nancy L. Johnson, R-5th District, is chairwoman of the House Ways and Means Health Subcommittee.*